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ABSTRACT

Designed as an aid for faculty and administrators, this paper presents guidelines for reviewing academic programs. After introductory material discusses standards of educational excellence and methods of assessing the quality of academic programs, the next section presents a guide for a systematic program review, setting forth a series of questions which address traditional academic concerns, other factors related to "value-added" evaluation, measurement of student services, and congruence of goals and program characteristics. These questions focus on: (1) general descriptive information about the institution, program, and methods used in program evaluation; (2) historical information about the curriculum and enrollments; (3) admission criteria, student assessment, and orientation programs; (4) faculty evaluation, salaries, development, professional achievements, and responsibilities; (5) facilities and equipment; (6) library and other learning resources; (7) affiliations and interinstitutional cooperation; (8) sources and levels of financial support; (9) self-assessment of the program's strengths, weaknesses, goals, resources, and support; (10) recommendations for changes; and (11) a plan of action to implement the recommendations. The final section presents a method of implementing the program review through a self-evaluation process and assessment by an external review team. (HB)

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A GUIDE FOR THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

This guide for the review of academic programs in higher education aims to suggest fruitful areas of inquiry to the faculty and administration of institutions of higher education who find themselves compelled to evaluate the academic programs of study within their purview. It is likely that the driving force, in whatever form it might take, originates from the vigorous public debate concerning the quality of education in America today. Educators who are sensitive to the recent rash of criticism, seek to retain public confidence in higher education by several means. One of which is an intensive evaluation of the heart of their enterprise-programs of study.

It is recognized that colleges and universities have evolved into multi-purpose institutions serving the community through research, human resources, and as repositories of the collected wisdom of the ages. Students, too, expect more from their college than academics. They and their parents want colleges and universities to not only instill knowledge but also to help students reach social maturity and provide a sense of what is good and worthwhile. For all this, however, and in the long run, a college or university will stand or fall on the quality of its academic programs.

"Quality" in the educational setting is an elusive concept to define, let alone measure. The evaluation of

quality in education is not and cannot be identical to the process in industry known as "quality control." In education we seek to influence that magnificent bundle of intelligence, emotions, memories, and purposiveness called a human being. The procedure used to evaluate the production of widgets bears no resemblance to the assessment of educational quality.

It is presumed, however, by the general public and governing boards that there is some universal standard of excellence operating in the minds of educators when they come to institute new programs of study, revise existing programs, or retire an entire curriculum. Education, dealing with the special interaction of human beings in which learning takes place, is not as much a science as it is an art. The question of quality in higher education, therefore, centers not on an eternal, immutable ideal; rather on something akin to the relative criteria found in aesthetics. One, then, speaks of quality in education more in relative rather than absolute terms. Yet, in both aesthetics and education, there is general agreement regarding indicators of what is good and bad. There is the same triumph of the human spirit when an artist succeeds in creating a masterpiece as there is when a college molds a scholar and an outstanding citizen.

Essentially, therefore, it is the obligation of the college to add something of value to students as they pass through the requirements of a course of study. In this sense, the general public rightly expects the college to take a person with a high school diploma, keep them at the institution for a length of time and, as a result of the exposure to college, produce a "better" person. Measuring the quality of this exposure is a matter of accounting for the degree of value added to the student's life from admission to graduation. While there may not be a universal standard of excellence to measure the quality of academic programs, there must surely be a judgement made of how much value has been added to a person's life as a result of a particular college and specifically as a result of successfully completing a program of study.

When an institution, therefore, passes judgement on its own educational program, it should do so through an examination of how and to what extent it is effective in adding the value expected. While it must be understood that the educational enterprise will be examined using norms of approximate success rather than employing an unforgiving criteria of excellence, the institution under scrutiny must provide evidence that its programs of study are worthy of support. The danger in emphasizing the relative nature of

educational objectives is that educators can be deceived into thinking that the employment of relative standards of quality implies that any qualitative investigation is illegitimate and affords the educator a kind of "diplomatic immunity." In more propitious times, educators have been able to deflect criticisms of quality by tauting their quantitative prowess. Demographics alone have rendered this defense untenable. The position taken here is simply that there is not, and should not be, an immunity from public scrutiny bestowed on educators.

With the foregoing in mind, a collection of questions is offered for consideration by those in higher education who will undertake an assessment of their academic programs. These questions are grouped in standard categories and are not intended to discover everything about a given program of study. Some of the questions address traditional academic concerns but many other questions are directed to the more recent discussion about the meaning of quality in education in terms of the "value added" concept. Emphasis is also placed on the measurement of student services before entering and while enrolled in a program of study. Through other questions, an analysis is encouraged concerning: congruence of goals and curriculum, student expectations, admissions standards, competency of graduates, alumni satisfaction, and rates of persistence.

II. A GUIDE FOR THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Title of Program Undergoing Evaluation _____

Department Primarily Responsible for Conducting the Program _____

Division in which the Department is Organized _____

A. General Descriptive Information

1. Briefly, what is the mission of your institution?
2. What are the goals of the program? (Include a brief statement of the knowledge and skills imparted, career competence of graduates, student development, relation to institutional mission.)
3. What degree or certificate is conferred to students who successfully complete the program?
4. In how many semesters is the program designed to produce graduates? On average, how many semesters does it actually take a student to graduate?
5. If applicable, what specific careers are graduates in the program prepared to enter?
6. Has your institution identified the level of literacy and skill acquisition graduates of this program should have attained?

7. Are students required to successfully complete comprehensive or competency examinations in order to graduate?
8. How does the institution determine the competency of students who have nearly completed all course requirements for graduation in this program of study?
9. In order to be employable, must graduates take certifying or licensure examinations? For each of the past 3 years, what percentage of students have passed the examinations on the first attempt?
10. Do programs similar to this usually receive accreditation from an outside association? If yes, from whom and what is the program's present accreditation status?
11. Is the program or department in which the program is offered formally affiliated with any association?
12. Are there special options available to outstanding students, (e.g., honors program) within the program itself?
13. Were any surveys conducted that attempted to ascertain student/graduate level of satisfaction with the program? What were the results?

14. Were any surveys conducted of employers to determine their satisfaction with the level of your graduates' academic preparation?

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Curriculum

a. In what semester was the program first offered?

b. Has the curriculum been formally reviewed within the last 5 years? Why did the review take place? What were the recommendations?

c. What are the required, elective, and general education courses in the present curriculum? (Indicate the suggested order in which courses should be taken and provide course descriptions for all required and elective courses within the discipline, and indicate number of contact hours and credit hours for each course.)

d. Have there been any major revisions of the program in the past 5 years? What were they? Why were they instituted?

e. What departments offer required courses for the program? Are these departments aware of the goals of this program?

f. How is the relevance of the program monitored between formal evaluations?

2. Enrollment

a. For each of the past three graduating classes indicate the number of students admitted as freshmen and of those, the number who eventually graduated.

b. What is the persistence rate in this program from freshmen to sophomore year and from freshmen year to graduation? How do these rates compare with the persistence rates for the entire college?

c. Have you identified courses which consistently show low enrollments? Has the institution justified the continuance of such courses?

d. Have you identified courses in which there has been higher than average number of student withdrawals? If so, have any measures been taken to address the issue?

e. In the past three years, what has been the percentage of productive vs. non-productive grades in each of the required courses for your program? (Productive Grade = A, B, or C; Non-productive Grade = D, F, I or W.)

f. In the list of courses contained in your catalogue for this program are there courses that have not been conducted in the last 3 years due to low enrollment or lack of interest by the faculty in

offering them?

g. What courses ought to be retired in the curriculum?

h. Is there a process whereby courses come under consideration for retirement?

i. What enrollment projections have been made in this program for the next 5 years?

C. ADMISSION

1. What criteria are used by your admissions office to admit students in this program? How did the college arrive at these criteria?

2. Are faculty involved in the admissions, orientation, and career planning for students in this program?

3. Has a profile been identified for the persister as well as the dropout?

4. Is there a mechanism for identifying the underprepared student?

5. Are the expectations of the entering students consistent with the stated goals of the program, the time it takes to complete the program, and the careers for which the program prepares graduates?

6. Are there any special features of the admissions process in this program that address a commitment to equality of educational opportunity?

7. For each of the last 3 years, how many students applied to the program and of those, how many were admitted and how many actually attended?
8. How are students oriented to the college and this program?

D. FACULTY

1. For each of the past 3 years, indicate the percentage of full-time vs. part-time faculty teaching required courses in the program discipline.
2. How are faculty evaluated in this program?
3. Indicate the present average compensation for faculty in each rank.
4. What memberships do faculty in the program hold in professional organizations whose purpose is to advance the discipline?
5. How many professional off-campus meetings related to the discipline did the faculty in this program attend last year?
6. How many papers were presented or workshops led by the faculty in this program last year?
7. How many articles or books were published by the faculty in this program last year?
8. What is the breakdown of highest degrees earned by the faculty in this program?

9. Has any faculty member received national, state, or local recognition for activities related to their discipline?
10. What college or department sponsored activities are designed to promote professional growth?
11. How are part-time faculty oriented and integrated into the academic mainstream?
12. What is the average teaching load of full-time faculty in this program?
13. To what extent do faculty use instructional media? What types of media are most often employed?
14. What is the level of faculty involvement in academic advising of students in this program?

E. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

1. What are the special facilities, other than regular classroom space, presently used for the program?
2. What equipment (value of $500 or more) is currently used in the program?

F. LIBRARY AND OTHER LEARNING RESOURCES

1. What are the special strengths of the library in relation to the program? The weaknesses?
2. Does the department have a special library budget? If so, what is the amount? If not, how does the department recommend acquisitions?

G. AFFILIATIONS AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

1. If the program requires an internship, field experience, or clinical experience, where are students generally placed to fulfill this requirement?
2. Have graduates of your program or students transferring to a similar program at another institution had any difficulty in using all credits earned in your program at the receiving institution?
3. In what other ways do faculty and students interact as representatives of the program with community agencies, other educational institutions or business?

H. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

1. How is the program currently funded?
2. Has the source of funding changed within the last 5 years?
3. Has the per capita student cost been calculated for this program in the past 3 years? If so, what has the per capita cost been for each of those years?
4. Has an average cost per degree recipient been calculated?
5. Excluding salaries, does the budget for this program incur higher than normal direct costs such as for maintenance, repairs, and supplies?

I. SELF-ASSESSMENT

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?
2. Are the goals of the program relevant to what the tudent needs to know in order to function effectively after graduation?
3. Is there congruence between the goals of the program, the mission of the institution, and the needs of the community?
4. Are the goals of the program logically consistent with the curriculum of the program?
5. Are there any responses to the questions in the preceding sections of this questionnaire that are sources of pride and concern?
6. Are the faculty adequately prepared to offer the courses in the curriculum?
7. In a brief fashion, where does this program fit into the long-range goals of your institution?
8. Does the equipment used in the program reflect state-of-the-art technology? What additional fixed or movable equipment, if any, is needed in order to improve the quality of the program?
9. Are library resources adequate?
10. Does the institution anticipate any organizational changes that will seriously impact this program?

11. Is it likely that adequate financial support will continue to be available to the program?

12. Is there sufficient student demand to continue the program as it is currently being offered? Should the program expand or contract?

J. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Are any changes in the curriculum necessary? If so, is this due to a change in goals?

2. Are any changes in admissions standards necessary?

3. How will the institution address the weaknesses identified in Section IX?

4. Does the institution need to change the degree or method of financial support for this program?

5. Are there any other important considerations not addressed by the preceding sections?

K. PLAN OF ACTION

How does the institution plan to carryout the recommendations indicated in Section X?

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Gaining consensus for the process of systematic review of academic programs is a critical first step. At one community college, the questions appearing in Section II of this paper, among other material, were distributed to Division and Department Heads. Faculty members were solicited to serve with their respective Department and Division Heads on an Internal Review Committee that would evaluate the program in which they themselves taught.

The charge to the members of this Internal Review Committee was to submit a report to the Dean regarding the academic quality of their program. The report was to include a self-evaluation based upon mutually agreed upon criteria and the assessment of an External Review Team. This External Review Team could be comprised of one or more faculty members from another college or from industry who had expertise relevant to the discipline being evaluated. Ideally, members of the External Review Team should not have had prior acquaintance with the institution or its faculty.

Minimally, the External Review Team should receive the results of the self-evaluation, program requirements, all course descriptions, student placement/transfer data, and a list of the faculty and their credentials. The

institution should also provide funds for the expenses and consulting fees of the External Review Team's on-site visit. Interviews with faculty and students should be conducted and an assessment made of essential learning resources, including library holdings and laboratory equipment.

At the conclusion of the on-site visit and before departing from the campus, the External Review Team should be required to meet briefly with the members of the department, Division Chairperson and Dean to relate first impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program under scrutiny. Later, the External Review Team can submit its full report to the Dean.

The results of both the external and internal review should be made known to the President and all faculty members involved. The President or Dean at this point ought to direct the Department to react to the report of the External Review Team and recommend a plan of action that would address the identified weaknesses and enhance strengths. This plan of action, after being amended by the President or Dean in consultation with the faculty, needs to receive formal institutional sanction, have measurable outcomes, and be bounded by a timetable.

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